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VIEWPOINT: THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDIA

By [discoversociety](#) September 02, 2014 1 Comment Issue 12, Viewpoint

Roger Jeffery (University of Edinburgh)

In May 2014, to the surprise of many commentators, India's Bharatiya Janata Party – the BJP – not only won the General Election (as widely expected), but did so with an overall majority by itself, without needing the coalition partners it had attracted before the poll. In the lower House of Parliament – the Lok Sabha – it now has 52% of the seats on 31% of the vote. It is the first time that an avowedly 'Hindu' party has held such a dominant position, and even before the election, voices within and outwith India were raised, expressing alarm at the likely impact on inter-religious relations in India.

The new Prime Minister – Narendra Modi, from Gujarat – had been Chief Minister there, from 2001 onwards. He is accused of 'sitting on his hands' during riots against local Muslims, following from an incident in which Hindu pilgrims died in a train fire. Some accuse him of having – passively or actively – encouraged the violence. He has never expressed real contrition for the failure of the forces of law and order to prevent the riots or protect the Muslim victims. As a result, he was declared *persona non grata* by the UK and US Governments, among others – decisions that were reversed once it was clear that he would gain national power.

The BJP's success in the elections has been linked to its sophisticated use of IT; to its ability to target messages differently in each of India's States; and also to different facets of Modi's own – carefully nurtured – reputation as a clean and effective administrator. But they also took advantage of inter-community conflicts, **like that in Muzaffarnagar** in western Uttar Pradesh, in August 2013, which led to Muslims being moved out of their home villages, where they were in a minority, supposedly for their own safety. The BJP garnered votes throughout the State as defenders of Hindus, sweeping the Parliamentary polls despite having only just 12% of the seats in the State Assembly. The BJP thus represents not only a particular social mentality – urban, educated, upper caste, middle class, 'proud to be Indian' (and dismissive of those who are not, or are proud of a very different idea of India) – but also increasing numbers of the wannabe middle class Hindus in rural India. As **its manifesto** put it, there is a need to meet the aspirations of the 'Neo-Middle Class'.

What have the first 100 days of the Modi Government shown us about his intentions and the likely effects of his rule? Some of it is humdrum: announcements about a focus on improving India's creaking public infrastructure through allowing foreign direct investment more opportunities in the railways, for example; skill development, with support for apprenticeships; job creation through flexibilisation of hire-and-fire rules. The President's Address to Parliament summarised this, saying that the Modi government will revive 'Brand India', through five 'T's – tradition, talent, tourism, trade and technology. Indeed, Modi worships not only at the shrine of Durga but also at that of 'Digital India': 'We have to take broadband connectivity to every village. We have to use this idea to revolutionise health and education.'

On the other hand, Narendra Modi used his own Independence Day speech on 15 August to address some **surprising issues**. Firstly, he placed the responsibility for the increasing number of rape cases highlighted in the Indian media on men, and asked the parents of young men to keep tabs on their sons just as they do for their daughters: 'But have you ever asked your son where he is going, why is he going and who are his friends? After all, the person committing the rape is also someone's son.' On a similar gender theme he criticised the Indian family's preference for sons over daughter, saying that sons will not necessarily look after their parents in their

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old age, whereas – in a celebration of a Victorian family pattern – ‘I have also seen families where a girl – an only child – devotes her life to serve her parents, staying away from marriage.’ Yet he also said that girls were ‘equal partners in India’s development’ and listed India’s poor sanitary arrangements as one barrier to women’s full involvement in the modern world, pledging separate toilet facilities for girls and boys in every school and every household a toilet within the next four years.

So far, so good, perhaps. But the ‘dark side’ of the BJP comes from its position as the parliamentary wing of several organisations that push forward an intolerant, authoritarian vision of a Hindu India. The Modi Government seems likely to provide implicit – or even occasionally explicit – support for ‘extra-constitutional’ groups known, collectively, as the Hindu Right or the Sangh Parivar (the ‘family’ attached to the Rashtriya Swayamseva Sangh, or RSS). For these groups, non-Hindus are relegated to second-class citizens (or, if Muslim, are encouraged to emigrate). Criticism of any of their partial view of Hinduism is militantly challenged, using force if necessary. Modi himself is a long-time member of the RSS, the organisation banned for many years after one of its members assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. Members and fellow-travellers of the RSS have for many years been waging campaigns against the foreign funding of NGOs, arguing, for example, that they secretly engage in Christian missionary activity. This seems to have been behind a **decision** taken in June to deny entry into India of an anthropologist from Birkbeck College, despite her valid visa. Unnamed sources suggested that her focus on gender and human rights was also ‘related to hampering the Indian economy.’

The Modi Government intends to act if it finds foreign-funded NGO’s activities work – however distantly – to constrain the activities of corporations intent on, for example, further exploitation of India’s large coal reserves and its associated increased carbon emissions. A major victim of this new approach is Vandana Shiva – supposedly a ‘rock star in the worldwide battle against genetically modified seeds’, who has been called the ‘**Gandhi of grain**’. She was identified in an Intelligence Bureau report as one of those whose opposition to unsustainable development models had, **they claimed**, delayed vital infrastructure and other projects, reducing India’s GDP growth rate by two to three per cent.

Other high profile human rights issues include the campaign to censor books that challenge comfortable received myths of Hinduism as a kind of vegetarian, spiritual religion based on historically verifiable facts. Thus the new Chair of the Indian Council for Historical Research **argues that** ‘the Ramayana is true for people...it’s in the collective memory of generations of Indians. We can’t say the Ramayana or the Mahabharata are myths. Myths are from a western perspective.’ In this way of seeing the world, Wendy Doniger’s book on Hinduism (pulped by Penguin India in March after threats) and others must be banned: ‘We are going to fight each and every example of this. We will leave nothing unchallenged that is against our customs, our religion, our nation,’ said Prakash Sharma, of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP).

Can a balance-sheet be drawn up, or a set of predictions for the next five years? It is hard to say what is going on under the radar. The BJP’s claim to focus on competence, cleanness and nationalism are undermined by its appointment as Minister of Human Resource Development (including education) of an **ex-Bollywood actor** whose higher education seems to consist of no more than six days in Yale on a leadership programme; on its dithering over **whether to allow foreign companies (read: Walmart, Tesco) to open shops in India**, despite having campaigned to prevent this; and on its links to prominent people accused of corruption, such as Dr Ketan Desai, who **accepted £65,000 of ‘goodwill’ money** from donors linked to his role as President of the Medical Council of India. Its previous spell in power – as part of a multi-party coalition from 1996-2002 – eventually collapsed as leading politicians squabbled over the spoils of power, much as had (and does) those in the Indian National Congress. Indeed, one further reason for BJP’s ability to humiliate Congress in 2014 was that Congress had forfeited all pretence at being a clean, secular party capable of providing leadership and vision.

The deep scepticism about the Modi Government’s commitment to even-handed protection for the human rights of its minorities, especially Muslims and Christians is not limited to the ‘usual suspects’. Whether or not the Government itself acts to limit human rights of minorities of various kinds, we can be sure that ‘Modi’s little helpers’ will be trying very hard to do so.

Roger Jeffery is Professor of Sociology of South Asia at the University of Edinburgh, where he has taught since 1972. His books include *The Politics of Health in India*, University of California Press, 1988, (co-edited) *Development Failure and Identity Politics in Uttar Pradesh*, Sage, 2014 and (co-edited) *Change and Diversity: Economics, Politics and Society in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2010.

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